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# THE MAN WHO COULD NOT SHUDDER

A DR. GIDEON FELL MYSTERY



JOHN  
DICKSON  
CARR





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**A Dr. Gideon Fell Mystery**

**John Dickson Carr**







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About the Author



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# I

“A HAUNTED HOUSE?” SAID the art critic.

“Yes, and very badly haunted,” said a voice we could not identify.

“How do you know?”

“I don’t know,” retorted the editor of the *Fleet Street Magazine*. “All I know is that it’s on the market. Here it is advertised in the *Times*.”

“But does it say it’s haunted?” persisted the art critic, who is a Scot and cautious.

“Not in the advertisement, dammit. It’s under ‘Essex.’ It says, ‘Longwood, picturesque Jacobean manor house, thoroughly modernized in 1920. Company’s electricity, gas, and water. Main drainage. Lounge hall, 4 rec., 8 bed. (h. & c.), 2 bath., modern off., etc.’ Do you think that if they had a ghost they’d put in, ‘gho., guaranteed to haun.?’”

“Where is the place?”

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“Thirty-five miles from London, four miles from Southend-on-Sea.”

“Southend. Oi.” said the actor.

“What’s the matter with Southend?” truculently demanded a novelist, who keeps a cabin cruiser there. “Finest air in the world at Southend. Finest—”

“Yes, I know. Ozone. Awful stuff. And it’s got the longest pier in the world, as you were about to say.”

This conversation took place round the bar at the Congo Club, in a crush so great that you could not move your elbow without spilling somebody’s drink. It took place on the afternoon of Saturday, March 13th, 1937, among a group of people whose names (with one exception) you need not bother to remember, because they do not appear in the rest of the story.

But the exception is notable.

Near the bar hatch opening into the lounge, there is a big white-marble mantelpiece with a mirror behind it. I have a very vivid memory of Martin Clarke leaning his elbow on this mantelpiece, a pewter tankard in his hand, and pricking up his ears like a dog. The fire crackled and popped just behind his

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legs, and must have been uncomfortably hot; but he did not move.

Under Clarke's thin white hair, flat-brushed and brittle looking, the pink scalp was beginning to show. But the rest of his face was of a deep, ingrained tan which no English winter could rub out. It showed up his light eyes, extraordinary eyes. Though he must have been over sixty at this time, his face was as mobile as a boy's. The wrinkles round eyes and mouth were amusement wrinkles or curiosity wrinkles, if they can be called that. He jumped at the very mention of a haunted house. In the mirror behind him you could see the back of his scalp stir. But he was too polite to butt into the conversation at a club where he was a stranger.

We very nearly drifted away from the subject, at that. The conversation began to degenerate into a violent argument about Southend. The source of the actor's grouse against that town, it appeared, was that he had once gone to an amusement fair there, and somebody sold him oysters at four for sixpence, and they disagreed with him.

"Anyway," said the art critic, "I don't believe it."

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“You don’t believe it?” said the actor. “You come with me and I can show you the stall where I bought ’em. Vile things. Tasted of iodine. They—”

“I wasn’t talking about oysters,” said the art critic. “Confound your oysters. I was talking about ghosts. Who says this house is haunted.”

“*I* say so,” declared the voice we had been trying to identify.

Hoots of derision went out in ripples and spilled drinks on the edge of the crowd. This was because of the speaker. He was a young man, with a traditionally solemn face, who writes humorous articles. But he appeared to be serious.

“All right, you bourgeois,” snapped the young man, waving a pink gin at us. “Go on. Laugh. But it’s true. Longwood House is known to have been very badly haunted for several hundred years.”

“How do you know that? From personal experience?”

“No, but—”

“There; you see?” interrupted the art critic, with triumph. “It’s always the same. Everybody has heard

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of a haunted house, until you try to pin 'em down. It's like the Indian ropetrick."

"I suppose you'll deny," said the youngster hotly, "that a man was killed there as late as 1920?"

This looked more like business.

"Killed? You mean murdered?"

"I don't know whether he was murdered. I don't know what did happen to him. All I know is that it was the most mysterious business I ever heard of, and if you can find a reasonable explanation of it you'll do better than the police have been able to do for seventeen years."

"What happened?"

Our informant seemed gratified at the interest he had aroused.

"I don't remember the name of the fellow who died," he went on, "but he was a butler. An old man of over eighty. A chandelier fell on him."

"Stop a bit," muttered the editor, peering at his newspaper. "I think I do remember something about it, at that."

"Ah!"



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“No, go on: what happened?”

Somebody bought our informant another pink gin, and he drank it earnestly.

“In 1920,” he said, “one of the last surviving members of the Longwood family decided to open up the house again. It had been vacant for lord knows how many years, after some nasty business that had driven the family out once before.”

“What business?”

“I don’t know,” said our informant, beginning to feel badgered and to make gestures. “I’m telling you what happened in 1920. The house was in a pretty bad state of repair, so the owner had it modernized and moved in.

“The source of all the disturbance (I can tell you this, straight from the horse’s mouth) was in one of two rooms. One was the dining-room, and the other was a room on the ground floor that the owner used as a study. Now, the dining-room has got a ceiling fifteen feet high. There’s a heavy oak beam down the middle of the ceiling, and from this beam hangs (or used to hang) the main chandelier. It was one of the old-fashioned kind that they stuck candles into, and weighed a ton. It was supported by six chains

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hung from a central hook screwed into the oak beam. Is that clear?”

He was beginning to enjoy himself, seeing that he had caught our attention.

“Hold on,” interrupted a black-and-white artist with a nasty suspicious mind. “How do you happen to know all this?”

“Ah!” said our informant, holding up his glass mysteriously. “Now listen, and drink it in. One night—I don’t remember the exact date, but you can look it up in the newspaper files—the butler was going round to lock up the house. It was about eleven o’clock. This butler, as I say, was a frail old man of over eighty. The family were all upstairs, getting ready to go to bed. And they heard a scream.”

“I knew they would,” said the novelist gloomily.

“Don’t you believe me?”

“Never mind; go on.”

“They also heard a crash that rattled their teeth, and sounded as though the house were falling. They ran downstairs to the dining-room. The hook supporting the chandelier had been torn loose from the oak

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beam. The chandelier had fallen on this servant, crushing his head and killing him instantly. They found him under the wreckage, together with a chair on which he had been standing.”

“Standing on a chair?” interposed the editor.  
“Why?”

“Wait!—Now,” continued our informant, pale with earnestness, “look at what happened. The chandelier couldn’t have fallen by itself. A builder testified that it had been there for a good many years, but that it was still solid. And, if you’re thinking of murder, nobody could have *made* it fall. That’s to say, there was no possibility of jiggery-pokery by which somebody could have made it fall from upstairs or anywhere else. It was simply on a big hook set in a solid beam, where nobody could tamper with it. There was only one thing that could have happened, and the evidence proved it did happen.

“The butler’s fingerprints—both hands—were found on the lower part of the chandelier. Now, he was tall. But, if he stood on a chair under it, and stretched up his hands, his fingers still would not reach within three or four inches of the chandelier.

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“What he must have done was this. He must have climbed on the chair, and then jumped up into the air and caught the lower part of the chandelier. Then (this can’t be doubted, from the condition of the hole in the beam) he must have swung energetically back and forth, like a man on a trapeze, until his weight pulled the whole thing out of the ceiling, and ...”

“*Wow!*” said the art critic.

Such a yell of laughter went up from beside the bar that even men in far corners of the lounge turned round to look.

It was not alone the intense seriousness of our informant’s face. But the picture of a frail old man of over eighty, swinging joyously back and forth on the chandelier like Donald Duck, was not one which could be considered without emotion of some kind.

Our informant changed color.

“Don’t you believe me?” he demanded.

“No,” we said as one man.

“Then why don’t you look it up? Go on—I dare you! Look it up!”

The editor called for silence.

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“But look here, old man,” he protested, in the kindly and consoling tone you might employ toward the feeble-minded. “Was this butler potty?”

“No.”

“Then why should he have done anything like that?”

“Ah!” said our informant, finishing his drink with a richly sinister air, and whacking down the glass on the bar counter. “That’s the whole problem, if anybody here would do me the courtesy of considering it. There you are. That’s what he did. But *why* did he do it?”

This sobered us somewhat. But it cannot be denied that we were all getting a trifle excited.

“Nuts,” said the art critic.

“It’s not nuts. It’s gospel truth. The condition of the wood in the hole from which that hook had been torn (the coroner admitted this at the inquest) proved conclusively that the butler must have swung back and forth on it before it fell.”

“But why?”

“That’s what I’m asking you.”

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“And anyway,” the novelist pointed out, “That’s got nothing to do with the argument. Where’s your ghost? It doesn’t prove a house is haunted just because an aged retainer jumps up and starts swinging on the chandelier, does it?”

Our informant drew himself up.

“I happen to know,” he declared, emphasizing the last word, “that the house is haunted. I know somebody who spent several nights there, and saw for himself.”

“Who?”

“My father.”

There was an awkward silence, after which somebody coughed. You cannot, in decency, come out flat and tell a fellow that his old man is a liar.

“Your father saw a ghost at Longwood House?”

“No. But a chair jumped at him.”

“What?”

“A damned great wooden chair,” cried our informant, thrusting out two thin-veined hands as though to show the dimensions of something, “of the kind they used to have in the old days. It jumped at

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him.” Seeing the skepticism in the faces round about, his voice grew shrill. “I know it’s true, I tell you. He told me so himself. I suppose you think that’s funny too? What would you do if a damned great wooden chair came right off the wall and jumped at you?”

“Stand and defend myself to the death,” said the black-and-white artist. “Or look for the strings that were tied to the chair,” he added. “Yoicks! Let me out of here. I’ve had enough.”

“There weren’t any strings tied to it,” our informant bawled after him. “The light was on. My father—”

“Sh-h, now! Take it easy. What’s yours?”

“Pink gin. But—”

The talk, dexterously steered, rounded the dangerous corner of Longwood House. And presently we went in to lunch.

Throughout this debate my guest, Martin Clarke, said not a word. He remained by the fire, for the most part looking reflectively into his pewter tankard, and swirling round its contents. He did not meet my eye, I suspect, because a friendly question would have made him explode into speech; and he

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would have been delivering an excited monologue for the rest of the afternoon.

For myself, the effect of the young humorist's story remained and rankled as something vaguely unpleasant. Perhaps I had taken the wrong sherry before lunch. I don't know. But, when you came to consider it, the suggestion underlying that tale of the agile butler was anything but comic. The narrator (I say this with all due respect to him) has a funny face; and we laughed less because of the story itself than because it came from him.

Assuming that our legs were not being pulled, and assuming he had got the facts right, it wasn't funny at all. An old man of eighty loses his head, and jumps up to catch at a chandelier—why? Because something is after him?

Clarke did not refer to the matter until we were leaving the club. Throughout lunch he was silent, though he chuckled several times, and once he lifted another pewter tankard to pledge my health. We were going down the steps, into a bright windy March day which tossed the trees in Carlton House Terrace, when he spoke.



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